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## **Opting out: professional women develop reflexive agency**

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### **Abstract**

#### **Purpose**

While previous research on opting out has been mainly about women who leave their careers altogether, this article follows a broader definition of opting out to investigate the process and experience of women developing agency as they leave masculinist career patterns to adopt alternative career solutions.

#### **Design/methodology/approach**

Building on an interdisciplinary framework and a narrative approach, this article analyses the opting out and in processes of women managers in Finland and the United States.

#### **Findings**

The article demonstrates four micro-strategies that the women used to develop individual agency in their processes of opting out of masculinist career models and opting in to alternative solutions for work. These micro-strategies are redefining career success, transcending boundaries, renegotiating working conditions, and keeping in touch with professional networks.

### Practical implications

Organisational leaders can use the knowledge of the strategies that empower women in their opting out processes when making decisions regarding working practices. In order to retain their employees, organisations should be supportive of employees' individual agency and their participation in developing work structures, as well as providing more opportunities for two-way blurring between work and family instead of the current one-way blurring where work spills over to family life, increasing work-family conflict.

### Originality/value

The article develops a framework to better understand women's agency during the process of opting out of corporate careers and opting in to solutions like part-time work and self-employment, deepening the current understanding of these solutions and presenting the micro-strategies they use to develop reflexive agency.

**Keywords:** opting out, masculinist career patterns, flexible careers, work-life balance, agency, women, career

### Introduction

Ever since Lisa Belkin (2003) coined the term 'opt-out revolution', the issue of women opting out of careers has been widely debated (Jones, 2012). As the debate has focused on women who leave the work force altogether, it has missed important aspects of professional women's experiences and agency. This article thus broadens the definition of opting out to include opting in to other solutions for work, as most of the current research has not adequately captured women who continue working but on different terms. In addition, while focus has been on push factors and questions of gender discrimination (see Cossman, 2009),

this article explores the question of agency. Opting out is not simply a case of women giving up on their career plans, but can also be a way for them to develop the agency to create alternative solutions for work, reorganise their lives and be both career women and mothers in a more sustainable way. This article develops a framework to understand how opting out as a mode of agency enables them to do that.

It has been argued that if women do opt out of their careers, it is because they are being pushed out of masculinist working cultures as a result of gender discrimination and an environment that does not support women (Stone, 2007). Prevalent masculinist career patterns are characterised by norms of continuous and uninterrupted work, and neither support, nor take into account, the cyclical nature of women's lives (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006; McKie et al., 2013). The linear ideal does not acknowledge shifts in situations and needs along the lifespan and masculinist career patterns are problematic for women as they juggle multiple roles. Especially mothers experience workplace discrimination, as they are often seen as unreliable employees and their children considered an obstacle in their careers (Chung and van der Horst, 2017; Acker, 2006, 2012; Kalaitzi et al., 2017). Many women feel powerless to do anything about this and find it easier to leave an organisation than to fight a battle that they do not believe they can win (Stone, 2007).

The opting out debate has mainly focused on educated, middle-class women who leave the work force altogether, and has neglected to capture the women who stay in the labour market but adopt alternative career patterns. Women who leave to care for children, seldom stop working altogether, but often create lifestyles and solutions for work that make it easier for them to combine different areas of life (Hilgeman, 2010; Stone, 2007). Also, although the

choices available to women who leave may be limited or less than optimal, it does not mean they are not making a choice (Cossman, 2009).

This article examines the narratives of four women from Finland and the US who opted out of top management positions to work on different terms. Although these two countries differ with regards to state provided support, care services and family benefits (see KELA, 2011; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016), the women share similar experiences and challenges when reconciling work with other areas of life. These challenges include corporate working cultures that expect long hours, dedication and constant availability (Acker, 2006). In addition, in both countries, it is mostly women who take time off work to care for children (EIGE, 2011; Williams and Boushey, 2010) and women are almost twice as likely to work part-time compared to men (Official Statistics of Finland, 2017; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Drawing on critique of masculinist career patterns, theories of agency and an alternative model of agency developed by Hoggett (2001), we examine the narratives of these four women to illustrate how women use micro-strategies to develop agency and create alternative and more sustainable approaches to work, where they can better combine different areas of life.

### **Opting out as a mode of agency**

The notion of opting out is not a coherent theory but rather an emerging, yet fragmented, area within women's career literature (Zimmerman and Clark, 2016). Since much of the previous research on opting out has focused on how women are pushed out of their careers (see for example Stone, 2007), questions of agency regarding the choices women make when leaving their careers remain somewhat limited in the debate on opting out. However, while gender inequalities may not only push women to make a choice to opt out, but also limit them as

they choose alternative paths, they take responsibility for their lives and families within “the degree of choice operating in” their lives (Cossman 2009: 426). This is supported by Hays (1994), who argues that choices are always made within the structures that enable and constrain agency. Agency can thus be seen as an ability to make sense of an array of available choices and act upon them within the existing social structures, and must therefore be understood in relation to social structures that can vary in degree over time and between individuals (Ketokivi and Meskus, 2015; Campbell, 2009).

The topic of women’s agency and its impact on women’s careers is pronounced in the debates on career models. While masculinist career models are broadly recognised as gendered, they continue to underpin corporate working cultures and environments (Acker, 2006; Biese and Choroszewicz, 2018). In these work environments there is an expectation of an uninterrupted linear career progression and many women struggle to combine a career with care responsibilities that continue to be predominantly ascribed to women (Biese, 2017; Biese and McKie, 2015; Blair-Loy, 2003). These masculinist norms are reflected in the organisational policies and practices that see women as the main users of work-family reconciliation policies (Choroszewicz and Tremblay, 2018). As a result, women may feel a limited capacity to make autonomous career choices that challenge the assumption of them as primary caregivers and demand more equal division of work at home.

As an alternative to the linear career model, Mainiero and Sullivan (2006) have developed the Kaleidoscopic career model to better capture the cyclical and multidimensional nature of women’s lives. The model contains three parameters that have different levels of importance depending on what is going on in a woman’s life and career at any specific time. The parameters are challenge, often more important in a woman’s 20’s; balance, usually central in

a woman's 30's; and authenticity, generally something women search for more in their 40's and their 50's. Nevertheless, as the metaphor of the kaleidoscope suggests, all three parameters are always present in a woman's life to different degrees. The model accounts for interruptions, discontinuities and sideways moves in women's careers, that are due to gender discrimination or care responsibilities. The model is also useful to explain the varying degree of agency that women may experience in different phases of their life.

The women in this study were all on the way to or in top management positions when they opted out. Gender norms are durable and relatively universal social structures (Hays, 1994) and may become salient when demands on work and personal life increase. It is then women might realise just how conflicting these two areas are, but nevertheless do not necessarily feel capable to do any about it. Similarly, in a study by Ketokivi and Meskus (2015), women did not feel capable to exercise free will and realise their chosen goals during disruptive phases in their lives. The authors thus challenge the idea that individual agency is something individuals possess intrinsically and that mainly comprises self-derived capacities. On the contrary, they find that agency is always relationally accomplished. Further, they argue that a problem with previous studies of agency is that they look at what an individual can do instead of studying what they cannot (ibid.). In other words, as in the case of women managers who opt out, looking at what they cannot do could provide a greater understanding of why they feel they have no agency to affect or change their lives despite their social and professional standing during the time before opting out.

In this article, we draw on Hoggett's (2001) alternative model of agency and focus specifically on individual agency, which is a capacity to recognise and make choices among those available. Hoggett's model has been developed within the field of social policy to

account for the situation of welfare subjects. Although not previously explored, parts of this model encompass the perspectives of agency described above and are helpful when analysing women's difficulties to combine a career with the gendered organisation of family life. The model critiques and builds on Giddens' (1979, 1984) structuration theory, which Hoggett (2001) argues, does not adequately account for the reality of the passive or dependant subject. Structuration theory holds that individuals are reflective and purposive agents, who not only are able to reflect over and explain their actions, but are also an intrinsic part of the structures in which they exist and which they continuously recreate through their actions (Giddens, 1979, 1984). However, women's choices are often not made in the way Giddens suggests, due to their conflicting roles in family life and at work. Structuration theory has thus been criticised for not considering constraints like norms and obligations (Williams and Popay, 1999), as well as not including questions of gender and women's multiple and conflicted roles (Mendus, 1993).

Hoggett's (2001) model comprises four quadrants: (a) reflexive agency, (b) non-reflexive agency, (c) self as non-reflexive object, and (d) self as reflexive object. Reflexive agency describes individuals who are reflexive and responsible as they are responsible for both choices made and discarded, although within the constraints of class and gender. Non-reflexive agency describes individuals' limited ability to account for and be reflexive due to denial, which prevents them from understanding their responsibility for an act. Self as non-reflexive object includes individuals subjected to domination who have experienced such powerlessness that it impacts their ability to reflect, affecting their very sense of self. Finally, self as reflexive object includes those who are reflexive and understand their situations, but who are unable to do anything about it.



‘Reflexive agency’ and ‘self as reflexive object’ can be used to understand how women develop agency through opting out. Before opting out they are in the ‘self as reflexive object’ quadrant and lack agency due to being embedded in masculinist career patterns and gendered family life, which constrain their realisation of alternative career choices. Moving from one quadrant to another may be difficult due to a sense of obligation, a fear of being rejected or the constraints of gendered cultural schemas and norms (Hoggett, 2001). Although Hoggett does not sufficiently explore how this can be done, in our study we have found that a personal crisis operates as a catalyst to propel women to make sense of the possibilities available to them and to make a change in their values and eventually also in their career choices. As a result, by realising their capacity to act upon the social structures in which they are embedded, women develop agency. While being pushed by a crisis accompanied by frustration and exhaustion, women adapt their career goals and make career choices, where they experience less conflict between family life and career (see also Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). They thus develop reflexive agency, which they need to reorganise not only their careers but also their lives as a whole. In short, opting out and in can be a process through which women develop reflexive agency, and they do so within prevalent gender norms and masculinist social structures.

## **Data and methods**

This article draws on a study consisting of eight Finnish and seven US women managers who opted out of high-powered careers to adopt new lifestyles and solutions for work where they could better combine different areas of life. The US was a natural place to start, as this is where the opting out debate originated. Finland, as a welfare state where women are provided with policies and practices to help them combine work with care responsibilities, serves as a contrast. The study was a critical examination of the women’s opting out experiences, the

reasons behind their decisions and how they made sense of these. When collecting data, a narrative approach was used. Narratives not only provide individuals with an understanding of their experiences, but also help them manage and organise their lives (Czarniawska, 2004). Narratives thus have a functional role, which makes the narrative method especially useful when exploring life changes and transitions like opting out (see for example Hoyer and Steyaert, 2015). In the interviews, which lasted 1- 2.5 hours, the women were asked to talk freely about their experiences from the time before opting out to when they had opted in to their new lifestyles or ways of working. The interviews were unstructured with few open-ended questions, allowing them to decide what they wanted to tell, and how, in order to facilitate their storytelling and allow them to elaborate as much as they wished without judgment or interpretation (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). All interviews were conducted in 2011 and were recorded and manually transcribed.

For this article, four interviews – two US and two Finnish – were selected to illustrate in detail the different stages of the opting out process and micro-strategies that may be used for developing agency. These four narratives are representative of the stages and experiences of the all the 15 women interviewed for this study. In addition, of the 15 women, they were the ones who chose either to become entrepreneurs or start working part-time after having opted out, common alternatives for women looking for more flexible work solutions (Chung and van der Horst, 2017, Redmond et al., 2017). Part-time work is a solution that women with care responsibilities often choose, despite it being seen as a deviance to accepted working norms for individuals with career ambitions (Chung and van der Horst, 2017). The two women in our study who chose part-time work after opting out were both ambitious but did so despite any negative effect it would have on their careers as they felt it would allow them to work on their own terms. Self-employment, on the other hand, while also seen as a viable

solution for women who deal with issues of work-life balance and seek to create more flexibility in order to deal with the competing demands of career and family, is not stigmatised in the same way as part-time work (Sevä and Öun, 2015). Entrepreneurship is often considered a good alternative to masculinist career models, one that will allow women to maximise their potential, exercise power and autonomy while also being able to be themselves at work instead of having to adopt masculinist behavioural norms; although this has also been debated as entrepreneurs operate within masculinist business environments with patriarchal values (Heilman & Chen, 2003).

Since the issue of whether part-time work and self-employment are good solutions for women with careers has been debated, we decided to look specifically at the women in our data set who chose these particular solutions to explore questions of agency. We illustrate our findings through the narratives of four women. Using these four narratives, we are able to capture and discuss both the similarities and differences in how the women develop agency during their opting out and in processes. They also help create an in-depth understanding of the women's situations throughout their opting out and in processes and provide insights into experiences, behaviours and patterns in relation to the context in which these take place. The aim is to illustrate, shed light on and problematise the process through which women who opt out may go to develop the agency to create alternative and more sustainable approaches to work. Before opting out, they all worked in organisational environments that, for employees in the upper echelons, are characterised by intensive work schedules and 24/7 availability.

All four women were white, educated and middle-class in the mid-career stage when they opted out and created new solutions for work (pseudonyms have been used):

- **Ella:** Finnish, 40 years old, married, one child. Senior manager in the service sector when she opted out; started working part-time for the same employer.
- **Michelle:** US, 40 years old, married, two children. She was a communications director and became an entrepreneur after opting out.
- **Naomi:** US, 45 years old, divorced, two children. She was a vice president in a public relations organisation and opted in to part-time project work for a different employer.
- **Nora:** Finnish, 45 years old, married, three children. Opted out of a job in investment banking, retrained in another field and became an entrepreneur.

It is important to recognise that these women were affected by their social privilege and standing. Three had spouses with similar or higher salaries and one was divorced. However, they had all been high earners before opting out and had funds to draw on before finding or creating new solutions. Having a high income before opting out, makes leaving possible and less risky than it would be for someone on a lower income level.

Using the hermeneutic triad (Hernadi 1987), we set out to examine the complex processes the women underwent as they opted out and in. The hermeneutic triad consists of three phases: explication (reading the transcripts to understand what is being said), explanation (understanding how and why it is so) and exploration (creating an understanding of what this means) (Czarniawska, 2004). In the first phase, we read through all the interview data and noticed a recurring pattern. The women all went through a similar process when opting out and in, going from having no agency to affect their situations to gaining the agency to make a career transition. During the second phase, we tried to explain why our middle-class, educated interviewees felt they had no agency and why this changed. However, we were unable to do so with the help of Giddens' structuration theory and therefore turned to

Hoggett's (2001) alternative model of agency, which enabled us to identify three recurring stages that were characterised by a varying degree of agency: the time before opting out, when the women felt they had little control over their lives and their time; the actual opting out that was triggered by an event or situation that helped them see that they needed to make a change; and the time after opting out when they used different strategies to gain control of their lives and careers. We then specifically looked at the issue of agency at each stage, what they felt they could and could not change and why, what made them recognise new options and the ways through which they made their career changes. The last phase of analysis led us to focus on the identification and investigation of the micro-strategies through which the women developed agency.

### **Stage 1: Women in the state of 'self as reflexive object'**

Of the quadrants in Hoggett's model, it is 'self as reflexive object' that describes the women's experiences before opting out. During the interviews it was clear that they had reflected a great deal over their situations but felt they had little control over their lives and their time, as well as feeling that there was nothing they could do about it. They worked long hours after which they rushed home to be with their children. All four women talked about the exhaustion they felt before opting out. However, despite having common experiences, these women considered their difficulties their own individual problems, as opposed to structural ones (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000). This feeling of loneliness, in combination with exhaustion, contributed to their sense of powerlessness and the inability to recognise and question the gendered structures of work that make it difficult for women to be both devoted mothers and committed career women.

Their jobs before opting out were very demanding in terms of hours and stress levels. Ella, for example, had to be on call for clients who would contact her at all hours of the night. For Naomi, the situation was exacerbated by the fact that, in addition to her high-pressure job, she was alone with the responsibility to care for her young children. Before she opted out, her husband at the time was not involved in childcare and was seldom at home when the children were awake:

I was overwhelmed, exhausted [...] the job was quite demanding in terms of hours and stress and I had a two-year-old and an infant... My husband was rarely if ever home... being stretched so thin really took a toll on my health and I was ill quite a lot.

Michelle's situation was especially difficult because of her employer's inflexibility. She missed important events in her children's lives due to a lack of understanding on her employer's part. She felt she had no control over when she could be with her children and her work was affecting their lives in a negative way:

It's hard to be a mother and to be at someone else's whim and schedule... to have someone dictating my choices when they affected my family so much.

Nora described how the time before opting out felt:

I [would] just perform at work, perform at home ... just constant performing and sometimes I [would] just run out of oxygen and I felt like I just don't have time to recover and I don't have time to even think about what I want and what's important to me.

These women were set on having the successful career they had been building over the years, as well as a family. Yet, it was only when they became mothers that they realised how

demanding it is to combine a career with raising children, which is especially true for women in management positions where work increasingly spills over into time spent with family.

Research has shown that many women feel that there is little they can do to change organisational culture and may be reluctant to voice complaints as they fear this will have a negative effect on their careers (McKie et al., 2013). Many women therefore choose to simply leave if the situation becomes untenable (Stone, 2007). Somewhat atypically, Ella actually tried to change her situation before opting out. She was exhausted and overwhelmed, and she approached her superior on several occasions to discuss her situation. She also appealed to the human resource and managing directors, but to no avail:

I started discussing [the situation] with my boss... that I'm too tired and there's too much work and the workload is too much for a small child's mother. I told him that maybe I have taken too much responsibility and maybe it was my mistake... I eventually called our HR director, our managing director, and my boss and I told them ... I'm willing to let part of my salary go... I just need to be sure I can work only eight hours a day... Three times we had the discussion [without any results].

The desperation Ella felt can clearly be discerned. While she attempted to take control over her life and create a solution that would allow her to both work and be the kind of mother she wanted to be – she even moved her family closer to work to make her commute shorter – nothing seemed to work. As in Hoggett's 'self as reflexive object', she could reflect over her situation, but she felt powerless. This powerlessness is similar to the loss of self that Ketokivi and Meskus (2015) describe in their study of individuals during times of crises. Like the three other women in this article, Ella found herself in a situation where she lacked the agency to change her situation.

## **Stage 2: Crisis as a catalyst to develop agency**

Although these women struggled to combine a career with care responsibilities, none of them planned to opt out. It was not until they experienced a crisis that they realised they no longer could go on the way they had. Blair-Loy (2003) has found that women who leave their careers are twice as likely to have had a crisis in the family than those who stay. However, previous studies of opting out have only briefly touched upon the issue of crisis as a catalyst for change. Mainiero and Sullivan (2006: 174) argue that crises drive individuals to search for authenticity in their work and lives, which, in turn, becomes a “force [...] to navigate a formidable transition period.” It was this crisis that propelled these women to act. It pushed them to rethink and adjust their career goals and break out of the masculinist career patterns and ideals, which subsequently moved them from the quadrant ‘self as reflexive object’ towards the ‘reflexive agency’ quadrant.

The nature of the crises that Ella, Michelle, Naomi and Nora experienced varied. For instance, for Ella it was an incident with her child that triggered such a deep identity crisis that she felt she simply had to make a change:

I was really tired, I had been working the previous night and still not finished what I was working on... and my son... was in such a good mood, such a happy boy. And then something went wrong and he [got] cranky... and the first thing I had in my head is that I’m going to slap him. I’m not a person who goes around slapping children... I thought to myself my job is not worth it. I would never forgive myself if I slapped him just because I’m so stressed.



Being drawn between the world of work and the role of the nurturing mother is tiring and challenging. For these women, it created a feeling of guilt and of never being in any one place enough – neither at work nor at home – which in turn left them feeling exhausted. As Naomi comments,

I had actually been to the emergency room a couple of times with a variety of symptoms that I think mostly had to do with exhaustion.

Although Nora also talked about being exhausted, it was not juggling a career and motherhood as such that finally pushed her to opt out. It was an incident at work that made her re-evaluate her situation. She was leading the organisation in a change process when the managing director suddenly, without warning or explanation, stopped the project, leaving Nora to undo everything. She felt undermined and betrayed and not only did she feel that it made her look bad, the company also suddenly stood for something she did not want to be a part of:

It was such a serious clash of values... I'm really disappointed in the way this was handled... it was, on a value level, such a huge clash.

Michelle also re-evaluated her priorities as a result of a crisis. Her husband was diagnosed with a debilitating disease and she suddenly became the sole provider and caretaker of not only her children, but also her husband. Nevertheless, she had very little flexibility; her job did not allow her to be with her family when they needed her. She talks about how she just could not do it anymore:

I just realised that there was a priority... and [my boss] was not very supportive of me... even during the period my husband was in the hospital. I just realised that that was not the right environment.

A crisis pushed these women to act in a situation where they previously felt they did not have agency. However, this newly found agency did not involve attempting to affect the structures they were in; they did not feel that they could change the organisations to make them more accommodating to their family needs. By recognising what they could not change, they gained a sense of agency within given gendered boundaries. As the next section shows, they left with the intention of finding a solution where they could more easily combine the different areas of life that were important to them. It was a gradual process; these women did not have a plan at the time of opting out, but knew that the way they had been working simply was not sustainable to them and their families. It was through their crises that they realised their own limitations within the structures of their work environments and the sacrifices that they were no longer willing to make. A crisis propelled the women to identify alternative career choices and act, thus helping them develop agency.

### **Stage 3: Developing reflexive agency**

A common theme in the narratives was that the women reported an element of not being able to be themselves during the time before opting out. This was a result of having to keep their care responsibilities hidden and separate from their work (see also Kanji and Cahusac, 2015). During their opting out processes they gave a lot of thought to what was important to them and what they were and were not willing to give up for their careers. Much like Belkin (2003) argues in her column, these women no longer saw their career success purely in objective terms, like salary, promotion and prestige. Michelle comments,

You just don't want to waste any time on anything that doesn't matter anymore...  
social pressures didn't matter to me anymore... and superficial things stopped  
mattering.

The women in this study adopted a subjective and more holistic view of career success, which involved a sense of control and authenticity, as well as having time for people and parts of their lives beyond their careers, and accepting that this meant sacrifices in terms of, for example, income level. By recognising what they could not change and making compromises that allowed them to adhere to what was important to them, they gained a sense of authenticity, which subsequently moved them towards the 'reflexive agency' quadrant in Hoggett's model.

When Nora opted out, she realised that she did not need the corner office, the company car and other things that are traditionally associated with success. After a few months at home she started retraining in another area with plans of starting her own business. During this time, she re-evaluated what a successful job meant to her:

[I want] the kind of job that doesn't mean that I have to give up everything that's important to me... I want to build something that allows me not to give up everything I've achieved.

Naomi had similar thoughts. She also spent some time at home, but eventually started working part-time for a company where she felt she could make a difference. For her, having it all meant making sure she could do all the things she loved, which involved compromise. She could not work the long hours expected of a career woman, but she did not want to be a full-time mother either and felt it was important to have a job that accommodated that:

I'm fairly adamant about managing the size of the wedges of the pie in my life that I care about, and work is one of them, but it's not the only one.

Ella also started working part-time. When approaching her superiors brought no results, her crisis made her decide that her only option was to leave the company. As she handed in a letter of resignation, her superior finally reacted and she was asked to reconsider and to define her terms. She decided to work part-time and thus stayed in the organisation but stepped off the career ladder, no longer caring about the next promotion. She opted out of a masculinist career model and adopted a different mindset. She simply wanted to be able to be both a mother and do meaningful work.

Ella and Naomi continued working in organisations with masculinist career norms, although on different terms. Ella did so in the same organisation, but Naomi started working in a different one, which was possible thanks to the wide network of contacts she upheld during her time at home. Both cut down their hours to be able to combine work and family in a more sustainable way. In Ella's case the situation is remarkable as working part-time had previously been unheard of for someone in her position. This means that although she, like the other women, did not feel that she could do anything to affect the structures she was in, her action still introduced a new company practice that had previously not been considered possible. These women are not isolated but part of the structures that surround them, which means that their decisions and actions inevitably have some sort of an impact, even though it may not have been their intention or something they were even aware of. Ella's actions may have made it possible for others in the company to start adopting career solutions that deviate from the masculinist ideal.

For Michelle and Nora, the situation was different. Both set up their own businesses; Nora to work as a life coach and Michelle to work with children and their well-being. Michelle partnered with another woman and created a work environment where they did not have to

keep their care responsibilities hidden. In addition, as an entrepreneur she not only had more power over her schedule, she also had more control over her life at large, which to her was what it means to be successful.

Michelle's and Nora's new solutions for work involved greater flexibility, but also a two-way blurring of boundaries. This provided them with a sense of authenticity, as they did not have to hide different aspects of their lives anymore, as well as control over where, when and how they worked. They thus transcended the dualist notion of public and private domains, of work and other areas of life (see also Chung and van der Horst, 2017), to alleviate the "wear and tear of constant transitioning", as Naomi eloquently described it. Michelle explains:

I feel more confident [in] what I'm doing because I'm not at someone else's whim... I feel calmer and I feel happier... I guess I'm less stressed. And I definitely have a fair amount of stress at times because with my own company it's me or nobody, but it's just different. I feel as though I at least can control that more, where it never felt it was in my control before.

## **Discussion**

Our findings shed light on how the process of opting out may operate as a mode of agency to opt in to alternative solutions for work for some middle-class women in the mid-career stage. Our contribution to the research on opting out and the relational dimension of agency lies in the exploration of micro-strategies through which the women in this paper developed the agency to realise alternative career options. Some of these strategies also had an impact on the structures of work in their organisations.

We have uncovered four micro-strategies that the four women in our paper used to develop agency: redefining career success, transcending boundaries, renegotiating working conditions, and keeping in touch with professional networks. They redefined their definition of success to reflect their individual needs and priorities in their current life situations (see also Hall, 1996) as they realised what they were sacrificing was not worth the objective definition of success, like a high salary, a company car and the next promotion. For them having the ability to do meaningful work and be the mothers they wanted to, became their new subjective definition of success (see also Ng et al., 2005). Another micro-strategy Michelle and Nora used was to create work solutions as entrepreneurs where they were able to transcend the boundaries of work and family life. Boundaries between work and other areas of life are becoming increasingly blurred due to technological developments (Choroszewicz, 2014b), however, it is generally a question of a one-way blurring, where work increasingly spills over into the private sphere but childcare responsibilities are best kept invisible at work (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014). By transcending these boundaries, Michelle and Nora enabled a two-way blurring. Although work continued to spill over into the private sphere, they no longer felt they had to keep their children invisible at work as they adopted a more holistic approach and their care responsibilities became a more integrated part of their professional lives. This allowed them to manage their schedules and control their time more efficiently, but also provided them with a sense of authenticity. Mainiero and Sullivan (2006) also emphasise the importance of authenticity. However, as contemporary individuals increasingly bring their whole selves to work and feel a need for a more holistic view of work and other areas of life (Hall 1996), authenticity might play a greater part in all the three phases of a woman's career than the Kaleidoscopic career model suggests.

Ella was able to renegotiate her working conditions after reaching her breaking point and deciding to give notice. This resulted in her working part-time for the same employer, which had been unheard of in her organisation. Naomi also started working part-time after a period of time at home with her children, although for a new employer. The opportunity came up thanks to her making a point of staying in touch with her professional network after having opted out. Ella's and Naomi's micro-strategies both contained a relational aspect, and as Ketokivi and Meskus (2015) argue, agency is sometimes impossible to perform without the help of others. Ella could not have renegotiated her terms had she not been a valued employee and had a good relationship with her superiors. Even though she was pushed to the point of wanting to resign, she was able to voice her concerns and bring the matter to discussion before that despite it not leading to any results, which was not the case for Michelle who did not have an understanding superior. This is supported by Tomlinson et al. (2017), who argue that a superior's support is important. Naomi was also able to create an alternative solution for work through relationships, although hers were with people in her professional network. As micro-strategies, renegotiation and drawing on professional networks are thus only possible in particular situations, as was the case for Ella and Naomi.

Our study shows that women's experiences in the work environment and with the employer are important factors that influence their decisions to opt out of workplaces, the micro-strategies that are available to them and the possibilities they have to create different solutions for work. This echoes Hall's (1996) remark about the diverse ways people achieve psychological success. The results of our study indicate that the micro-strategies women use to develop agency can be diverse because of their different situations, needs and subjective experiences of gendered structures. Their micro-strategies are also embedded in their work environments, which influence which type of agency they develop. In our study we have

noticed that some women have exercised agency only within given gendered structures of work, and others, such as Ella, managed to challenge and thus affect the gendered structures. The cases of Nora and Michelle also illustrate that if the work environment is hostile or unsupportive, women are less willing to even try to stay and negotiate their terms, and instead choose to simply leave. Michelle had a very controlling and nonunderstanding superior and Nora experienced a clash of values and a lack of support from her superior. This highlights the importance of organisational structures that enable women's strategies to develop agency.

The availability of flexible work arrangements can create an enabling structure for women to stay and not opt out completely or to re-enter an organisation. This availability differs not only across organisations but also across countries. The more accommodating culture for women with children in Finland, provides Finnish women with more power of negotiation when it comes to creating solutions that make it easier for them to combine work and motherhood (Choroszewicz, 2014a). Yet, as our study illustrates, welfare provisions to facilitate work-life reconciliation are not necessarily sufficient to promote women's career advancement, especially for those in the upper echelons of organisational hierarchies. This is partly due to masculinist career patterns that are incompatible with the contemporary parenting ideals (Smithson and Stokoe, 2005) as well as the lack of organisational incentives and peer support to encourage fathers to take on more caregiving responsibilities (Choroszewicz and Tremblay, 2018). In addition, research has shown that if the organisational culture and the immediate manager do not support the use of welfare provisions, they will likely remain unutilised (Tomlinson et al., 2017). Some organisations in Finland provide their employees with the possibility to seek work arrangements that allow them to better reconcile professional and care responsibilities (Choroszewicz, 2016), which is less common in the US (see Epstein et al., 1999; Stone, 2007). Nonetheless, the availability



of flexible work arrangements does not necessarily directly challenge masculinist career patterns instilled in the prerequisites for career advancement, nor does it challenge the gendered organisation of family life (Choroszewicz, 2016; Cahusac and Kanji, 2014). This is partly due to the gendered expectation of masculinist career patterns for men and flexible careers for women, which are also reflected in welfare provisions as well as organisational policies (McDonald, 2018).

When organisational cultures override the usage and impact of legislative support, professionals with care experience have been found to experience discrimination, which undermines their individual agency (Hobson et al. 2011). Through opting out, the women in our paper were able to develop two types of individual agency: agency within given gendered boundaries when the work environment is hostile and unsupportive; and agency to challenge and possibly impact gendered structures if they are valued employees within supportive work structures. The first type of agency lead to them leaving their organisations altogether, as in the case of Michelle and Nora, and potentially reproduce gendered roles and norms. They did not stay and try to change organisational practices and given their increased flexibility after opting in, they also typically took on even more care responsibilities at home. Still they achieved more individual agency, which enabled them to seamlessly move between the work and family spheres without the risk of being seen as less committed workers. The second type of agency, as in the case of Ella, enabled a broader change of organisational structures.

## **Conclusion**

This article develops an interdisciplinary framework to better understand and capture women's agency during their opting out and in processes. The article demonstrates how exhaustion from juggling the demands of a successful career with children may contribute to

women feeling that they have no agency to affect or change their situations, despite their social and professional standing.

The contributions of this article are threefold. Firstly, the application of Hoggett's (2001) alternative model of agency enabled us to break the opting out and in process into three stages, which has proven crucial to advancing our understanding of women's individual agency within prevalent masculinist structures. The first stage, 'self as reflexive object', captured why women feel they have no agency despite their social and professional standing. The second stage, crisis as a catalyst to develop agency, highlighted the prominence of crises as 'tipping points' that push women to search for balance and authenticity through alternative career options, as they no longer feel they can go on the way they have. The third stage, developing reflexive agency, illustrated the micro-strategies that women may use to develop agency and how these strategies are related to the work environment. Second, we extend Hogget's model of agency to show the ways in which crises can serve as catalysts for change and enable women to develop agency through individual micro-strategies that help them move from 'self as reflexive object' towards 'reflexive agency'. Third, the article contributes to the understanding of the role of organisations in enabling employees' individual agency by levelling the playing field for employees who juggle demanding careers with the gendered organisation of family life. As Mainiero and Sullivan (2006) also argue, we thus call upon organisations to invest in family-supportive cultures, policies and programs that enable women's individual agency.

The four narratives in our paper do not allow for generalisations, however this study advances our understanding of opting out and in as a mode of agency, as well as the role of the work environment in enabling or constraining women's individual agency. While our

study focuses on white, educated, middle-class women leaving high-powered corporate careers, future research is needed to explore question of agency among women of different ethnic and social backgrounds, whose experiences, opportunities and strategies for agency may differ. In the meantime, our study shows that there is potential for agency when opting out. This agency may be exercised through the use of micro-strategies by women within given gendered structures of work, and either lead them to leave unsupportive organisations or stay in supportive work environments and help make the gendered structures more enabling of individual agency.

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